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AUTHOR Ventura, Ellen; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that primary education needed to be changed in order to make it research-based and developmentally appropriate, a group of teachers in Wyoming developed a multi-age, team-taught class, called the Primary Education Program. The first year's class included 3 teachers and 60 students in kindergarten through first grade, and the second year included 4 teachers and 80 students in kindergarten through second grade. The mission of the program was to transform the traditional classroom into a setting that met the needs of young children, rather than one that required the students to meet the needs of the school. Four goals established to meet that mission were to: (1) provide for each child's unique and sporadic growth; (2) eliminate alternate placements; (3) achieve full inclusion of special education students; and (4) eliminate retention in a grade. Included in the class are students aged 5 through 9, or students in kindergarten through second grade. The teaching team consists of four primary teachers, one of whom is a special education teacher. The teachers work with the music, art, library, and physical education teachers to integrate the curriculum used in the classroom into the specialists' classrooms. The multi-age program, which is a full-day program for all students, allows greater flexibility and opportunities in instruction. (HOD)

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A Kindergarten Through Second Grade Multi-Age Classroom

by

Ellen Ventura, Mary Baker, and Margaret Shaeffer

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A KINDERGARTEN THROUGH SECOND GRADE MULTI-AGE CLASSROOM

(Part I—The Mission and Components)

By Ellen Ventura, Mary Baker, and Margaret Shaeffer

Changes in early childhood education have taken many forms in the last few years. As schools work toward implementing research-based programs for young children, one trend has been the implementation of multi-age classrooms that combine children from more than one grade level into a single class taught by a team of teachers. This article, the first of two, describes the mission, components, and planning for one early childhood multi-age classroom in Wyoming. Part II will describe planning implementation of the program.

The class is called the Primary Education Program, or PEP for short. It is a multi-age, team-taught class, which is in its second year of implementation, for kindergarten through second grade students. The first year's class included three teachers and sixty students of kindergarten through first grade ages, and the second year includes four teachers and eighty students of kindergarten through second grade ages.

The multi-age program was initiated not by the State Department of Education, nor by the school district's administrators, but by the teachers who saw changes that needed to be made in primary education in order to make it research-based and developmentally appropriate. The teachers, talking together, found that they had a common vision for the future of primary education. Essential to the vision was the underlying mission.

The Mission of the Primary Education Program

The mission of the Primary Education Program is to transform the traditional education classroom into a setting that meets the needs of young children, rather than requiring the students to meet the needs of the school. Within this mission are four goals.

Goal 1: Provide for Sporadic Growth

The first goal is to provide for the sporadic growth found in children in kindergarten through second grade. Traditionally, schools place students in one grade level for each year that they are in school, based on their age. And traditionally, in each grade level a continuum of skills is presented to be mastered at a gradual and regular rate throughout the school year. Although such curricula can address what is generally expected of a child at a given age, they do not address the individual dimensions of development that make children unique as learners and thinkers. The learning rates for children in kindergarten through second grade vary widely, and growth is sporadic as opposed to gradual. When the timing of growth for all students in the primary grades is expected to be uniform, as in a traditional graded classroom setting, the student who is able to work at an accelerated level feels a lack of growth and an abundance of boredom if he or she is not appropriately challenged. On the other hand, the student who is not able to consistently work at the level dictated by an expected uniform learning rate feels a lack of ability. These children become

anxious, and this tends to contribute to the deterioration of their performance and self-esteem.

In the Primary Education Program, students are not required to spend time on knowledge or skills that have already been mastered, nor are they asked to complete tasks without the necessary prerequisite skills in place. Each child works on an individually appropriate level. Each student meets with success as he or she progresses on a sporadic learning timeline unique to the child. As a result, developmentally appropriate instruction is provided, and learning increases.

Providing an increased time span for expected learning is included in the goal of providing for sporadic growth. The flexibility provided by a multi-age classroom, in which students are given a three-year period to master certain skills, addresses this needed time span. Students who attend the Primary Education Program grow over the three year period, and constant adjustments in instruction are made for each student. Their educational needs are met by basing the program on curriculum that allows the children to progress at individual paces. Ongoing assessment used in a multi-age program enables provision of appropriate instruction for higher functioning students and allows time needed for lower functioning students to grow and learn at their own pace. Ongoing assessment of each student is used to determine continuing instruction strategies, resulting in teaching decisions based on the skills that the individual students have mastered, not on their traditional grade placements.

One of the greatest advantages of a multi-age classroom is the opportunity for students with young behaviors to model the more mature behaviors of the other students. This role modeling results in peer learning experiences that are valuable both to the student who is learning the behavior or skill and to the student who is able to model it appropriately.

Goal 2: Eliminate Alternate Placements

The second goal within the mission is to eliminate the need for alternate placements. Literature on Effective Schools Research includes articles about schools that use the tracking, or "sort-and-select" system (Steller, 1988). In the sort-and-select system, students fit into various types of alternate programs that may influence their progress as well as their educational futures. When a child has been sorted into or selected for an alternate program that results in an extra-year placement, expectations for the child's level of competency are usually lowered. Current literature does not support the benefits claimed for these extra-year programs and indicates that negative side effects occur just as they do for retention in later grades (Brewer, 1990).

In Sweet Water County School District II, these alternate programs presently include Developmental Kindergarten and Transitional First Grade. Developmental Kindergarten, a program for kindergarten-age children, is a year spent in school before entering regular kindergarten. Placement in this alternate program is based on information from kindergarten screening that takes place in the spring before the students enter public school. The developmental kindergartners attend school half day, and the curriculum is based on pre-kindergarten readiness skills. Transitional First Grade is a year spent in school between kindergarten and first grade. These students are not able to successfully progress at the uniform learning rate expected in traditional kindergarten. Placement is based on

recommendations of the kindergarten teachers. The transitional first graders attend school full day. Since these students have already attended kindergarten for a year, the curriculum is not a repetition of kindergarten, but is based specifically on skills that the students lacked to be ready for traditional first grade.

Participation in these alternate programs results in spending four years in school rather than three before entering third grade, and this determination, which has an impact on students' lives when they are 18 or 19 years old, is made when they are 5 or 6 years old. Research also indicates that extra-year placements provide no improvement in long-term achievement or social outcomes (Kelley & Surbeck, 1991).

Demands that all students learn at a uniform and traditional rate, or risk being sorted into or selected for an alternate program, do not allow for individual and sporadic rates of development. A multi-age class breaks down the structure of the traditional classroom and eliminates the need for sorting and selecting by providing the time span needed for the sporadic growth found in children ages five through eight. Given this larger time span for development, students will be ready for third grade and will not have to realize an extra year in school. The individual needs of developmentally delayed students working at a lower level are met, and alternate programs that require students to spend an extra year in school are eliminated.

At the end of the first year of implementation of the multi-age program, 50% of the children who had been in Developmental Kindergarten the year before and would have been in kindergarten during that year had grown to function as ending first graders and had already made up what would have been an extra year in school. The other 50% still have another year in the multi-age program during which they may also grow to the point that they do not have to realize an extra year in school. Also at the end of the first year of implementation of the program, 70% of the students that would have traditionally been placed in Developmental Kindergarten that year were functioning at an ending kindergarten level, indicating that they had already made up what would have been an extra year in school. The other 30% still have two years provided in the multi-age program that may result in progress that will not require them to spend an extra year in school. This growth, for both groups, can be attributed to providing for the sporadic growth found in young children as well as providing appropriate role models for learning.

Goal 3: Full Inclusion of Special Education Students

Another form of sorting students into alternate programs is the use of special education pull-out programs. Because one of the Primary Education Program team teachers is a special education teacher, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of disabled children is provided within the PEP classroom. Therefore, no alternate programs for special education instruction are needed for any of the special education students in the Primary Education Program. The special education teacher also provides learning support for both the students and the other teachers in the form of different materials, instructional methods and approaches.

The multi-age classroom structure supports the belief that participation of disabled students with their nondisabled peers lessens the negative social consequences and erosion of self-esteem associated with being labeled disabled and placed in a pullout or self-contained program. Research shows

that, because of greater motivation and opportunities to learn, disabled children in a regular classroom progress as well or better than they do in a special class (Hasazi, Rice, & York, 1979). In a multi-age classroom, the disabled students are provided with role models for physical, social, and cognitive behaviors. Both nondisabled and disabled children benefit greatly from the participation of disabled students as they learn to value and accept individual differences.

Although students are referred for special education assessment if there appears to be a need, the number of students being referred is smaller, and these students receive assistance within the classroom. Generally the students do not even know who the special education students are, and in most cases, the special education students do not even realize that they are special education students.

Goal 4: Eliminate Retention in a Grade

The last goal of the program's mission is to eliminate the need for retention in a grade. Traditionally, grade retention has been used as a form of remediation for at-risk students who are functioning below traditional grade level expectations. Research indicates that when children are retained their performance is actually lower in the next grade than if they had not repeated a grade (Shepard & Smith, 1990). It is also important to note that research has consistently indicated that a strong correlation exists between grade retention and dropping out of secondary school (Dawson & Rafoth, 1991). Other studies have indicated that the only thing a child fears more than retention is the death of a parent, which speaks directly to the effect that retention has on self-esteem (Shepard & Smith, 1990). The use of retention in the primary grades does not recognize the sporadic growth found in young children. The multi-age structure, which provides an increased time span for sporadic growth, eliminates the need for grade retention by allowing students to develop appropriately and at their own pace.

Another advantage that the multi-age program has over retention is that the progress is continuous from the end of the previous year. When a child is retained, much of the year is spent reteaching skills that the child has already mastered until the point at which the child was not reaching mastery the year before. The result may be that the child loses interest in learning during the part of the year that is easy which, in turn, affects further learning later in the year.

Components of a Multi-Age Classroom

First Component: Multi-Age Student Participants

Included in the class are students aged five through nine or kindergarten through second grade age. The Primary Education Program is a regular education program that, like any classroom, includes a range of developmentally delayed to developmentally accelerated students. Within this range are at risk students and disabled students. Included in the program are students who would traditionally be placed in Developmental Kindergarten, Kindergarten, Transitional First Grade, First Grade, or Second Grade and disabled special education students who would traditionally participate in pullout or self-contained programs.

Second Component: The Teaching Team

The second component of the multi-age program is the teaching team. Four primary teachers make up the PEP teaching

team. As mentioned before, one of these four teachers is also a special education teacher. The PEP teachers also work with the music, art, library, and P.E. teachers to integrate the curriculum used in the classroom into the specialists' classrooms.

The teachers work as a team and share in the instruction of all of the students in the Primary Education Program. This allows the teachers to emphasize their strengths and exposes the students to a variety of teaching methods resulting in greater success in learning. Greater instructional flexibility is provided by a team of teachers rather than by one single teacher. The result is a closer match between instruction and the student's placement in the curriculum.

Having the students in the program with the same team of teachers for all three years means that the second and third year students are already acquainted with the teachers and the environment, which makes the beginning of these school years much less stressful for them. The teachers also already know most of the children, including information about their home lives, their backgrounds, and their experiences prior to school. This facilitates a closer working relationship between the teachers and the parents as they continue to work together for their children.

Third Component: Full Day Program

The third component of the multi-age program is the full day program for all of the students including kindergarten age children. This is a change from the traditional half day kindergarten program and allows for greater flexibility and opportunities in instruction. This expansion of the kindergarten program especially provides students who would otherwise have been placed in Developmental Kindergarten with the instructional time needed to meet with educational success.

Full day attendance provides the students with greater opportunities to develop physical, social, emotional, and intellectual skills. Children come to school with wide developmental spans, and the all day schedule allows for more discussion, application, and activities in all curricular areas.

Although some parents were concerned that their children coming to school for the first time would have difficulty with the full day schedule, the children have had no problem. At the end of the day it is usually the teachers who are ready for a nap!

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(Editor's Note: Part II, the March issue of Insights, will describe the planning and implementation of the program.)

Ellen Ventura and Mary Baker are two of four teachers in the Primary Education Program, a multi-age, team-taught class for kindergarten through second grade age students in Green River, Wyoming.

Dr. Margaret Shaeffer is an Early Childhood Special Education Professor at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming, who has assisted with implementation of the program.

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